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ABSTRACT

An instructor's experiences in teaching an introductory anthropology course organized around films are presented. Following a description of the atmosphere at the community college in New York City and the characteristics of the students, a rationale is provided which cites films as a means of breaking down the traditional barriers to learning of these students. The films, glossary words, and pictorials used in the 15-week course are then listed on a week-by-week basis. Topics covered are genetics, evolution, adaptive change, cultural adaptation, state formation, and colonialism. Finally, the positive and negative results of the class are discussed, especially in terms of how the students were affected. (DC)

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Teaching With Film: Anthropology in the Community College*

Geraldine Day McNelly

At the city college where I teach in New York City, I experimented last year with an introductory anthropology course built around a series of films selected from a compendium of films available to all schools within the CUNY system. Since the course was assigned to me only 24 hours before it began, too late to order books, films occurred to me at first somewhat out of necessity. The first meeting of the class brought 50 students, 15-20 more than the usual the year before. It meant that classroom discussion was problematical.

Setting for the Course. The three credit hour course met for 45 minutes 3 times a week. The class ranged in age from recent high school graduates to women who were mothers of high school children, returning to school for an associate degree. Students were either working, or on TAP or Vietnam Vet funds; a very few middle class students were supported by their parents in part or in whole. Women with small children brought them to the school's daycare center, formed and operated by students, unsupported or even acknowledged by the college. Students majored in computer science, business, accounting and nursing for the most part.

The school has a vitality due to the nature and variety of the student body. Their many clubs and art groups (drama, film, dance), and various services offered to help students survive, such as remedial English, CETA funded paper-writing tutoring create an atmosphere of a busy community. The cafeteria and student lounge are noisey, smokey and moving--lots of marijuana but relatively clean of hard drugs. The grafitti in the ladies' room includes exhortations to keep a good guy if you've got one, that lesbian love is best, or to seek Jesus. The clothing worn ranges from youth fashion fads, or individualistic costumes to the predominant shirts, jeans and sweaters.

Although Anthropology is offered as a major, the majority of students take the introductory course to fulfill elective requirements. They have registered for the course due to curiosity, scheduling demands, or because it was the only course still open when they registered. Some students attempt to steer a wide berth of the professor and others become personally involved in the course and our projects together. They have been educated in public or Catholic schools, are used to an authoritarian learning situtation, and to some degree expect an adversary relationship between student and professor. Therefore, for example, they were likely to focus their attention immediately and begin to write in their notebooks if something is written on the blackboard. They are often unskilled in study, reading and writing, unlikely to read from choice, and would often fail to see the contradiction between an assertion that they had no time to read an assignment and the discussion of the television program they watched during the same period. They may come to class tired, restless and occasionally stoned.

However, certain general characteristics also make the classroom situation easy and an interesting learning experience. These multiethnic, working class students, many of whom are the first generation in their family to go to college, seem to have an awareness that lends itself to anthropology. That is, New York life, like any city life, I suppose, includes news items and street knowledge about ongoing

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problems between blacks and Jews, cops and blacks, public school teachers and students, the political beliefs and activities of Rostaferrians, Hassitic Jews, or Puerto Rican nationalists, the stereotypes of Haitians, Jamaicans, Italians and Irish. Students also know the conditions of their work place, as well as these neighborhoods, where hierarchy, bureaucracy and ritual behavior demonstrate class and power on an everyday basis. The level of awareness and the ability to verbalize in these areas is rich. Therefore, although the students' fatigue or restlessness in class may be due to the conditions of their urban and working class life, so, too, is their particular awareness and potential perceptions, whose character matches so well the subject of anthropology.

Rationale for Films. Aside from any practical exigency, the students themselves were the reason film was chosen as the focus for the course. It would maximize the students' assets as well as create a learning environment that was freer and more creative than the traditional one. Film presentation appears to me to have the following advantages: film is an attention-getter and therefore decreases classroom control issues and furthermore, de-emphasizes the role of the teacher, thus relaxing the relationship between student and teacher; students who are reluctant to read will gain some amount of information in a powerful and stimulating form that favors discussion outside as well as insidethe classroom; the shared experience in a large classroom where people might otherwise not get to know each other allows the development of social relationships; film presentation allows all students the possibility of learning material, regardless of reading skill development; analysis of films in class include both subject matter and viewpoint of the film, encouraging critical skills; and of course, it is well known that this generation has grown up with film--movies and television.

All other course material was chosen to be supplemental to the films, designed to relate to the concepts brought out in the weekly films, including a glossary, synopses of each film, study guide questions for Jomo Kenyatta's Facing Mr. Kenya (a small paperback), and a term paper with an oral report on its main themes. This plan allowed lots of writing practice for the students, a chance for me to flush out problems in order to send needy students to remedial or tutorial service, to monitor students for improvement throughout the semester, created conditions for personal contact otherwise improbable in a large class, allowed students an opportunity to learn even if they did not read books and thereby, hopefully eliminate their need for one of the local services--a term paper sales agency. Furthermore, it seemed that in a classroom containing such a panoply of human differences that a broad range of requirements would allow a broad range of responses, thus maximizing each individual's possibilities.

Films are the genre of this generation, they are the stuff of everyday life; films are not intimidating or dominating despite the power of the medium; they can be controlled through criticism and individual opinions. They are not obscure but easily perceived; films, unlike text books belong to everyone and everyone feels free to discuss them. Opinions, personal life experiences and insights of students appear to flow redily in film post-mortems. The reality of exotic people is verified, to these students, by film.

The personal contact and frequent writing assignments allowed me an opportunity to gain insight into each individual's life experience so as to guide them into an area of term paper research that was personally interesting. For example, after seeing the dhatura-snorting Yanomamo, a student came to discuss drugs with me, which led to the subject of peyote and thus research on Chief Joseph, American history and the Indian, and finally a dynamic oral presentation of the history of native Americans. The vast writing assignments for this course allowed lea way to those students who rarely came to class: if they showed up on film day, and had contact with students in the class, they could put together some sort of showing. The oral presentation allowed students who could not write very logically to show their abilities in another way. On these days alotted for oral presentations, the students more or less took over the classes, argued with and compli mented speakers, brought in artifacts for demostrations and discussed comparitive points with one another.

All material presented inclass supplementary to the films was visual. Glossary words and charts or graphs were put on the blackboard for all discussions. Artifiacts, tape recordings or products from other cultures were presented to the class.

Presentation of the Films. The films were chosen in a logical sequence: genetics, evolution, adaptive change, cultural adaptation and evolution, state formation, colonialism. The precise films are as follows:

Week I. Evolution and the Origin of Life
Gene Action: Heredity and Adaptive Change

Glossary: included evolution, gene flow, genetic drift, mutation, natural selection, species variation, race theory.

Glossaries were intended to be sequential so as to naturally lead from one idea to the next. They would ideally adhere to Freire's concept of generative themes, created by students and teacher together, including anthropological terminology that leads to the word or themes meaningful to the lives of the students. In the above example, race theory is the last word in the series and the one designated to be personally relevant to the students.

Week II Baboon Behavior
Dr. Leakey--the Dawn of Man

Glossary: pongids, hominids, tool traditions, sexual dimorphism, socialization, society and culture.

Charts of geological eras and tool traditions; my own amusing, at least to me, drawings of pithecanthropine and australopithicine were put on the black board.

Week III Cave People of the Philippines

Glossary: paleolithic, ecological niche, mode of production, unit of production, division of labor, reciprocity, reductionist theory.

Chart: including material, social and symbolic institutions and systems (an elaboration on Sahlins' Tribes, Prentice Hall)

Week IV Eskimo Fight for Life

Glossary: Cross-cultural, primitive, band, tribe, chiefdom, holistic, environmental conservation, art.

Week V Cree Indians of Mistisinni

Glossary: Contact, acculturation, resistence, enculturation, ritual, totem, socialization vs. education.

Week VI The Hunters

Glossary: ethnocentric, androcentric, gathering, horticulture, subsistence surplus, women's studies.

Week VII The Feast
Magical Death

Glossary: alliance, exchange, population pressure, carrying capacity, swidden agriculture, slash/burn, circumscription, ecological anthropology, imitiative magic, shamanism, hallucinogens.

Week VIII African Village Life:The Mali (Bozo)

Glossary: social organization, exogamy, matrilineal, patrilineal, cross cousin, sororate, leverite, age grades, prescriptive, proscriptive, consanguine, collateral.

Week IX Himalayan Shaman
Pocomania

Glossary: cultural imperialism, colonialism, syncretism, millenarianism

Week X The First Americans and their Gods

Glossary: migration, diffusion, cultural evolution, irrigation, hydraulic system, conflict theory, state formation.

Week XI Ancient Kingdoms in N.E. Africa
Ancient Egyptians

Glossary: rank society, redistribution, incipient state, proto-state, peasant, agriculture, political anthropology, fictive relationships.

Week XII Slide Show after Checkov's short story"Peasants"(this is my own creation because here are seemingly no films about peasants).

Glossary: feudalism, industrial revolution, serf, rural-urban continuum, alientation, free labor.

Week XIII Family of Ghana
Kenyatta: Profiles of Kenyatta

Glossary: capitalism, colonialism, urbanization, neo-colonialism.

Week XIV How the West was Won and Honor Lost

Glossary: native American, sociolinguistics, emic/etic, assimilate, psychological anthropology, social history.

Week XV Ain't Gonna Eat My Mind
The Case Against Lincoln Center

Glossary: urban anthropology, ethnography, anthropology of education, cognition, ethnicity, race theory.

During the 14th and 15th weeks plus the designated examperiod, students gave oral presentations of the main themes of their papers.

Results. Good because (1) everyone complained about too much work, (2) people chose interesting topics for papers; (3) people stayed after class to talk; (4) library workers told me positive student gossip; (5) Media people who delivered the film and projector each week stayed and also brought friends; (6) a few students brought members of their

families to class including children (which meant to me that they felt comfortable as opposed to the student-teacher enmity assumption); (7) two students who were really ill-educated did excellent work. Those examples are given below; (8) The Jesus Club invited me to join them Wednesday afternoons due to my interest in religion; (9) about 41 students ended up the term, and most incompletes were finished during the next few weeks; (10) Only one case of cheating; (11) Hallway discussions spoke of Yanomamo, Tasaday and other peoples in an intense and realistic way. For example: "They (Tasaday) always feed their children first" or "They (Yanomamo) must have had something awful happen to them to be so crazy." "The Spanish." No, the drugs--they're always stoned." More than one student told me that they would never have believed that these people wer real if it weren't for the films; (12)spot check on glossary seemed reinforcing of this approach.

Glossary Spot Check. Students use their own words to define terms. They are encouraged to discuss class assignments and concepts together. Therefore, occasionally the exact glossary is turned inby two different peopel. More often certain word definitions were identical or two or more students. The spot check is therefore necessarily impressionistic. Definitions were accepted as correct if they contained some basic elements of the word even if they added extraneous information or left out some elements. For example, slash/burn was described by one student as "clearing, burning, planting by a stream;" potlatch described as "showing off accomplishments, a type of gathering, showing off goods," or again as, simply, "redistribution." The spot check is on 18 words (out of 100) from the glossaries of 26 students (out of 41). The breakdown may be summed up as more than 1/2 the students got more than 1/2 the words right. These type of checks are used because no exams were given. The method of checking is not satisfactory, however.

Contraindications. This type of teaching may confuse some students who are use to and have learned how to manipulate the tradtional classroom situation, and therefore may not react positivelyto this method. For one thing, there is an overall appearance of relaxation which does not mean there are no values operating, a seeming contradiction, perhaps to students from authoritarian schooling situations which socialized them to believe that teachers are either "strict" or "easy". Having categorized this as an "easy" situation may lead them to misconstrue the seriousness of the work assignment. Secondly, it is a lot of work and grades are based on a work ethic; any sign of cheating is dealt with severly. Thirdly, this plan allows students to skip classes easily by coming only on film day and getting the rest from classmates. However, this has benefits as well since it creates relationships and interdependency among students who might otherwise remain isolated in so large a commuting school. Fourthly, the intimate and personal nature of the course as it develops may have a negative aspect. That is, I seek personal relationships with each student to guide them in their research and attempt to urge them toward research in an area that is personally important to them. Also, in class, I integrate what I know of particular student's beginning research into the class discussions, to reinforce the work that students are interested in, and to help students get to know and respect one another for their intellectual qualities and concern with ethnicity. Although some students develop unknown strengths within such an environment, other students who prefer to stay anonymous, sit at the back of the class, prefer exams to papers and perhaps resist this type of relationship throughout the course. It is necessary to win their confidence, if possible.

Beverly. Despite these problems, however, I continue to try to work out this type of teaching. Delightful events lead me on. For example, Beverly. She was born and bred in a nice middle class black area on Long Island. But after she divorced a few years ago, she and her two children were forced by financial realities to live in a bad neighborhood, which she described as the Battle of Crabs. Her living conditions offended her sense of dignity. She returned to school and entered my class. Her writing was in Black English and appeared extravagant. I gave her Dollard's book on Black English and suggested remedial classes and term paper tutoring as well as at-home note taking while listening to station WLIB, the Afro-American station. Beverly was precise in her oral explanations to me of her intentions, her problems, why she was late or absent, what material she understood or didn't understand, and she worked very hard. The film of Kenyatta fascinated her; she read his book and researched the Mau Mau. By the end of the semester, she had gotten helpful tutoring, had unravelled a lot of thoughts and wrote about Kenyatta and colonialism, the Mau Mau as a political group struggling to regain their country and their dignity, something with which she deeply identified.

Mary. Another woman, Mary, was born and bred in Harlem. She wrote papers in Black English and very rhythmically. Her mother had been church organist as she was growing up. She now belonged to the Jesus Club. She always wore jeans and told me she liked the way I dressed because I didn't set myself above her. She liked the films on Shamanism. We discussed religion and discussed how religion was practiced differently among the righ and the poor. Then I brought her I.M. Lewis' Ecstatic Religion and she wrote a paper about religion after some sessions in the remedial English course. Her oral presentation of the paper was so dynamic and poetic that the class began to respond to her as she talked. (She said, Oh, I'm wasted today; they said, you wasted, Mary? Yes, I'm wasted but I'll tell you bout this paper. Go ahead, Mary.Go On.) At the end everyone clapped.

Both women were turned on by the films and started thinking because of them. My belief is that education occurs when personal life is the basis for intellectual questioning and that the life of each individual contains the elements that are the subject of anthropological questioning. Aware that part of the schooling system descriminates against non-white middle class students (Kohl, Kozol) and that working class language (Bernstein) and black language are not the lingua franca of the school situation, and that schools tend to maintain the status quo (Jencks, Carnoy), it seems most important that the city of community college facilitate the learning of those most discriminated against, to work precisely with the language situation and to disrupt the status quo. The people themselves can be the subject of their own education (Warner, Freire). In the multi-ethnic city college, anthropology should be no mystery for cultural relativity and colonialism are arguments of the neighborhoods and workplaces and the struggle of city people's lives. Indeed, anthropological concepts may come easiest to those previously least tutored in academic subjects and thus are tools for upward mobility. The method of presentation, however, must not contradict the message. Film, perceived as an integral part of urban students' lives facilitate dialogue, and thereby a critical awareness of the lives and history of the worlds people including their own.

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